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# THE COMMUNITY OF LANGUAGE<sup>1</sup>

BY JOHN GALSWORTHY

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WE are celebrating the memory of a great man of Letters. What strikes me most about that glorious group of New England writers—Emerson and Longfellow, Hawthorne, Whittier, Thoreau, Motley, Holmes and Lowell—is a certain measure and magnanimity. They were rare men and fine writers, of a temper simple and unafraid.

I confess to thinking more of James Russell Lowell as a critic and master of prose than as a poet. His single-hearted enthusiasm for Letters had a glowing quality which made it a guiding star for the frail barque of culture. His humor, breadth of view, sagacity, and the all-round character of his activities has hardly been equalled in your country. Not so great a thinker or poet as Emerson, not so creative as Hawthorne, so original in philosophy and life as Thoreau, so racy and quaint as Holmes, he ran the gamut of those qualities as none of the others did; and as critic and analyst of literature surpassed them all.

But I cannot hope to add anything of value to your estimate and praise of Lowell—critic, humorist, poet, editor, reformer, man of Letters, man of State affairs. I may, perhaps, be permitted however to remind you of two sayings of his: "I am never lifted up to any peak of vision—but that when I look down in hope to see some valley of the Beautiful Mountains I behold nothing but blackened ruins, and the moans of the down-trodden the world over. . . . Then it seems as if my heart would break in pouring out one glorious song that should be the Gospel of Reform, full of consolation and strength to the oppressed—that way my madness lies." That was one side of the youthful Lowell, the generous righter of wrongs, the man. And this

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<sup>1</sup>An address delivered before the Academy of Arts and Letters in celebration of the Lowell Centenary, February 22, 1919.

other saying: "The English-speaking nations should build a monument to the misguided enthusiasts of the plains of Shinar, for as the mixture of many bloods seems to have made them the most vigorous of modern races, so has the mingling of divers speeches given them a language which is perhaps the noblest vehicle of poetic thought that ever existed." That was the other side of Lowell, the enthusiast for Letters; and that the feeling he had about our language.

I am wondering, indeed, what those men who in the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth centuries were welding the English language would think if they could visit this hall tonight, if suddenly we saw them sitting here among us in their monkish dress, their homespun, or their bright armor, having come from a greater Land even than America—the Land of the Far Shades. What expression should we see on the dim faces of them, as they took in the marvellous fact that the instrument of speech they forged in the cottages, courts, cloisters, and castles of their little misty island had become the living speech of half the world, and the second tongue for all the nations of the other half! For even so it is now—this English language, which they made, and Shakespeare crowned, which you speak and we speak, and men speak under the Southern Cross, and unto the Arctic Seas!

I do not think that you Americans and we English are any longer strikingly alike in physical type or general characteristics, no more than I think there is much resemblance between yourselves and the Australians. Our link is now but community of language—and *the infinity which this connotes.*

Perfected language—and ours and yours had come to flower before white men began to seek these shores—is so much more than a medium through which to exchange material commodities; it is cement of the spirit, mortar linking the bricks of our thoughts into a single structure of ideals and laws, painted and carved with the rareties of our fancy, the manifold forms of Beauty and Truth. We who speak American and you who speak English are conscious of a community which no differences can take from us. Perhaps the very greatest result of the grim years we have just been passing through is the promotion of our common tongue to the position of the universal language. The importance of the English-speaking peoples is now such that

the educated man in every country will perforce, as it were, acquire a knowledge of our speech. The second-language problem, in my judgment, has been solved. Numbers, and geographical and political accident have decided a question which I think will never seriously be reopened, unless madness descends on us and we speakers of English fight among ourselves. That fate I, at least, cannot see haunting the future.

Lowell says in one of his earlier writings: "We are the furthest from wishing to see what many are so ardently praying for, namely, a National Literature; for the same mighty lyre of the human heart answers the touch of the master in all ages and in every clime, and any literature in so far as it is national is diseased in so much as it appeals to some climatic peculiarity rather than to universal nature." That is very true, but good fortune has now made of our English speech a medium of *internationality*.

Henceforth you and we are the inhabitants and guardians of a great Spirit-City, to which the whole world will make pilgrimage. They will make that pilgrimage primarily because our City is a market-place. It will be for us to see that they who come to trade remain to worship.

What is it we seek in this motley of our lives, to what end do we ply the multifarious traffic of civilization? Is it that we may become rich and satisfy a material caprice ever growing with the opportunity of satisfaction? Is it that we may, of set and conscious purpose, always be getting the better of one another? Is it even, that of no sort of conscious purpose we may pound the roads of life at top speed, and blindly use up our little energies? I cannot think so. Surely in dim sort we are trying to realize human happiness, trying to reach a far-off goal of health and kindliness and beauty; trying to live so that those qualities which make us human beings—the sense of proportion, the feeling for beauty, pity, and the sense of humor—should be ever more exalted above the habits and passions that we share with the tiger, the ostrich, and the ape.

And so I would ask what will become of all our reconstruction in these days if it be informed and guided solely by the spirit of the market-place? Do trade, material prosperity, and the abundance of creature comforts guarantee that we advance towards our real goal? Material comfort in abundance is no bad thing; I confess to a considerable

regard for it. But for true progress it is but a flighty consort. I can well see the wreckage from the world-storm completely cleared away, the fields of life ploughed and manured, and yet no wheat grown there which can feed the spirit of man, and help its stature.

Lest we suffer such a disillusion as that, what powers and influence can we exert? There is one at least: The proper and exalted use of this great and splendid instrument, our common language. In a sophisticated world speech is action, words are deeds; we cannot watch our winged words too closely. Let us at least make our language the instrument of Truth; prune it of lies and extravagance, of perversions and all the calculated battery of partisanship; train ourselves to such sobriety of speech, and penmanship, that we come to be trusted at home and abroad; so making our language the medium of honesty and fair-play, that meanness, violence, sentimentality, and self-seeking become strangers in our lands. Great and evil is the power of the lie, of the violent saying, and the calculated appeal to base or dangerous motive; let us, then, make them fugitives among us, outcast from our speech!

I have often thought during these past years what an ironical eye Providence must have been turning on National Propaganda—on all the disingenuous breath which has been issued to order, and all those miles of patriotic writings dutifully produced in each country, to prove to other countries that they are its inferiors! A very little wind will blow those ephemeral sheets into the limbo of thin air. Already they are decomposing, soon they will be dust. To my thinking there are only two forms of National Propaganda, two sorts of evidence of a country's worth, which defy the cross-examination of Time: The first and most important is the rectitude and magnanimity of a Country's conduct; its determination not to take advantage of the weakness of other countries, nor to tolerate tyranny within its own borders. And the other lasting form of Propaganda is the work of the thinker and the artist, of men whose unbidden, unfettered hearts are set on the expression of Truth and Beauty as best they can perceive them. Such Propaganda the old Greeks left behind them, to the imperishable glory of their land. By such Propaganda Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch; Dante, St. Francis; Cervantes, Spinoza; Montaigne, Racine; Chaucer, Shakespeare; Goethe, Kant;

Turgenev, Tolstoi; Emerson, Lowell—a thousand and one more, have exalted their countries in the sight of all and advanced the stature of mankind.

You may have noticed in life that when we assure others of our virtue and the extreme rectitude of our conduct, we make on them but a sorry impression. If on the other hand we chance to perform some just act or kindness, of which they hear, or to produce a beautiful work which they can see, we become exalted in their estimation though we did not seek to be. And so it is with Countries. They may proclaim their powers from the housetops—they will but convince the wind; but let their acts be just, their temper humane, the speech and writings of their peoples sober, the work of their thinkers and their artists true and beautiful—and those Countries shall be sought after and esteemed.

We, who possess in common the English language—"best result of the confusion of tongues" Lowell called it—that most superb instrument for the making of word-music, for the telling of the truth, and the expression of the imagination, may well remember this: That, in the use we make of it, in the breadth, justice, and humanity of our thoughts, the vigor, restraint, clarity, and beauty of the setting we give to them, we have our greatest chance to make our Countries lovely and beloved, to further the happiness of mankind, and to keep immortal the priceless comradeship between us.

JOHN GALSWORTHY.